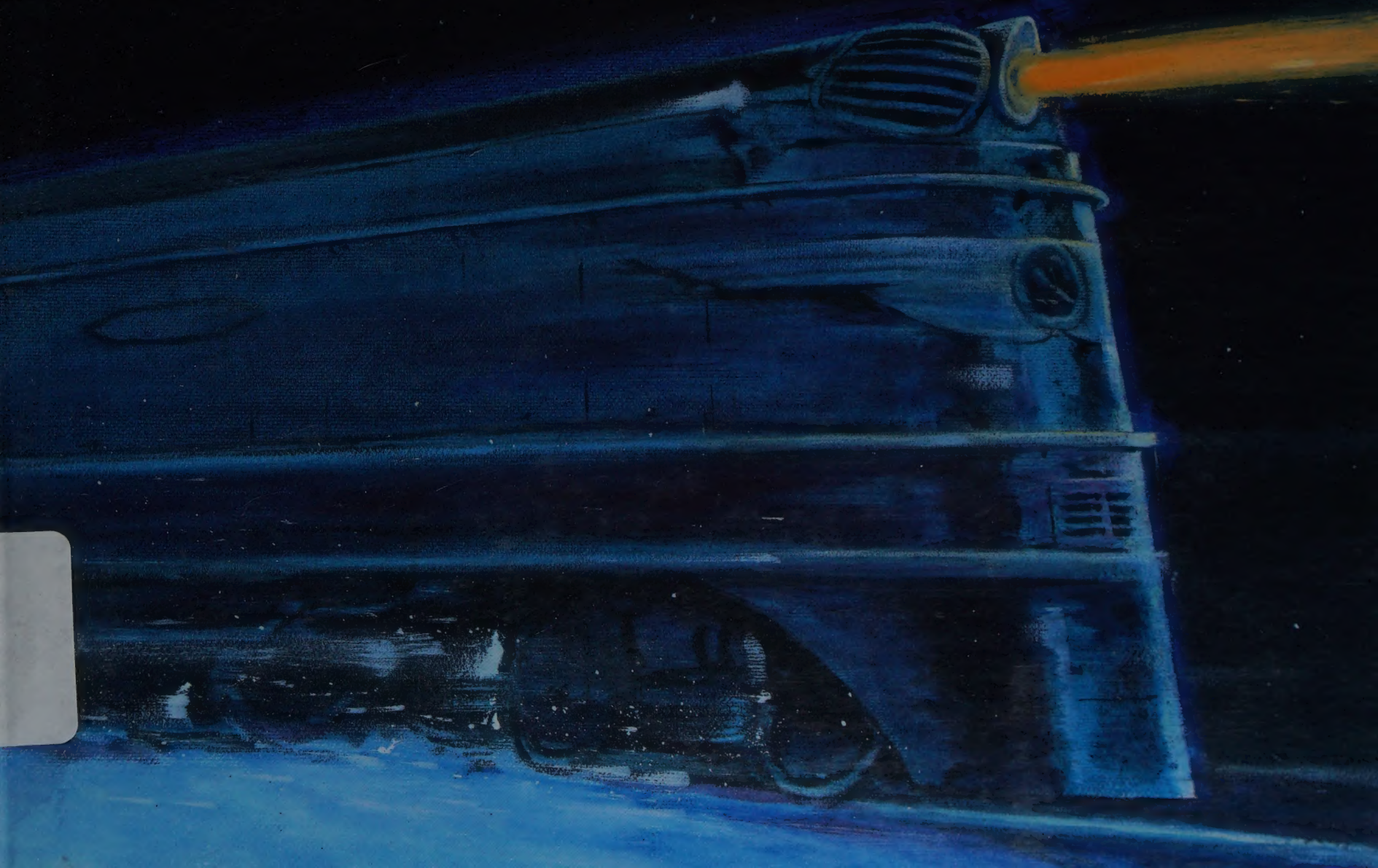
Hiawatha Passing

BY JEFF HAGEN PAINTINGS BY KENNETH SHUE



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On a cold starry night, a young boy is awakened by a low, distant hum. Then he hears a whistle crack across the countryside. A light speeds toward the farmhouse,and the boy watches in awe as the fastest, most powerful train in the world blazes past.

Jeff Hagen captures the wonder of his own childhood encounters with the great *Hiawatha*. In these pages the *Hiawatha* once more roars down the tracks, as it did on its famous high-speed journeys across America's heartland from 1935 to 1970. Kenneth Shue's rich, detailed oil paintings recreate the power and beauty of the legendary train, and of one breathtaking moment in a boy's life.

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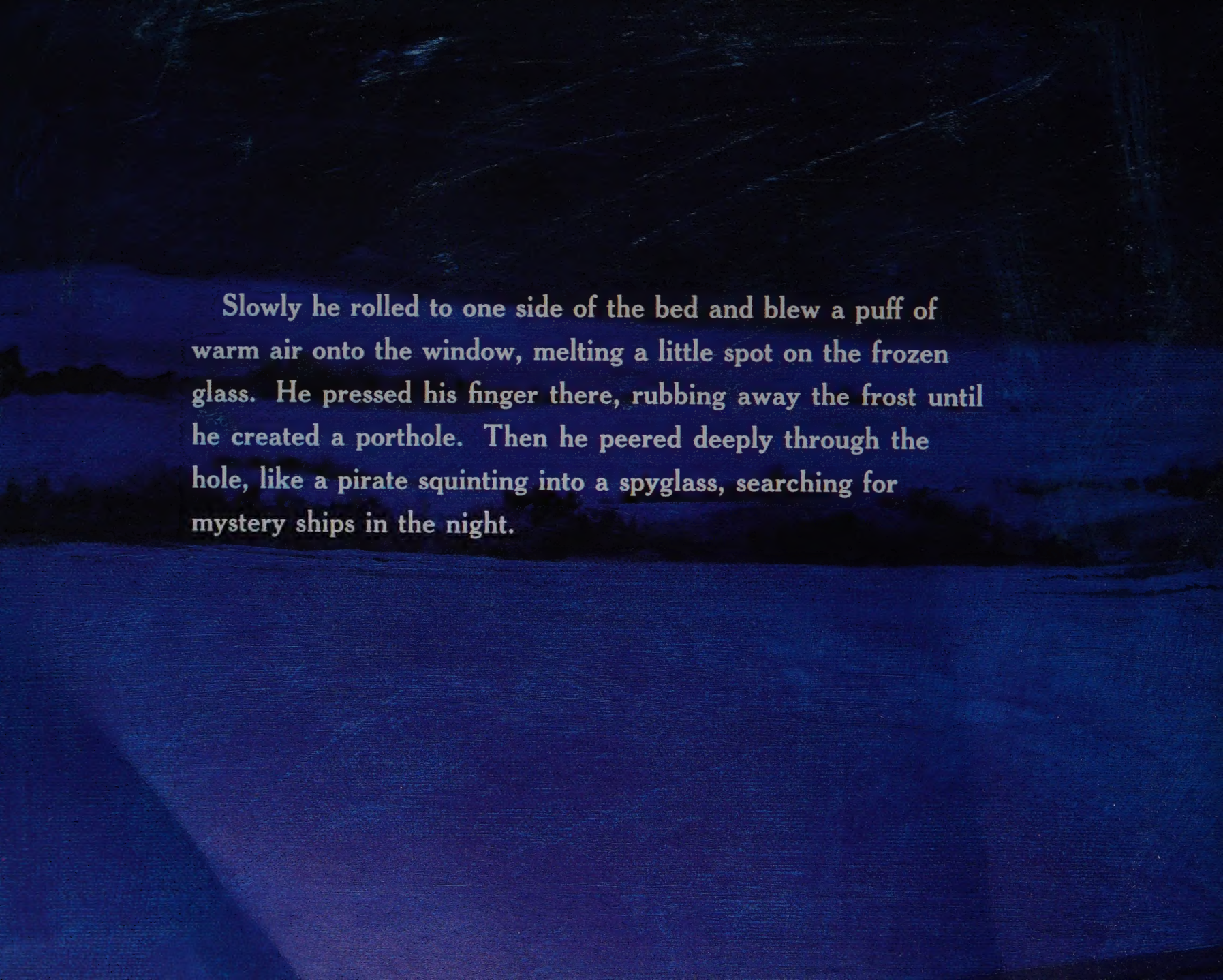
On a cold starry night, a boy awoke in the upper reaches of his grandparents' tin-roofed farmhouse. Only moments before he'd fallen asleep, his harmonica at his side. Now he thought he'd heard a low, distant sound. Did it come from outside? He snuggled beneath his feather quilt, trying to figure it out.

This was the first time he'd spent the night at his grandparents' place, nestled way out in a land of rolling hills and faded red barns. Far below his window two silver rails stretched across a wide valley covered with a thin layer of new snow.

What was that sound? he wondered. It had come to him as a soft hum, like a gentle breath on his harmonica. *Was it a dream?*

He listened. Nothing.



Slowly he rolled to one side of the bed and blew a puff of warm air onto the window, melting a little spot on the frozen glass. He pressed his finger there, rubbing away the frost until he created a porthole. Then he peered deeply through the hole, like a pirate squinting into a spyglass, searching for mystery ships in the night.

For an instant the boy caught sight of a glint on the frozen steel railroad tracks at the edge of the farmyard.

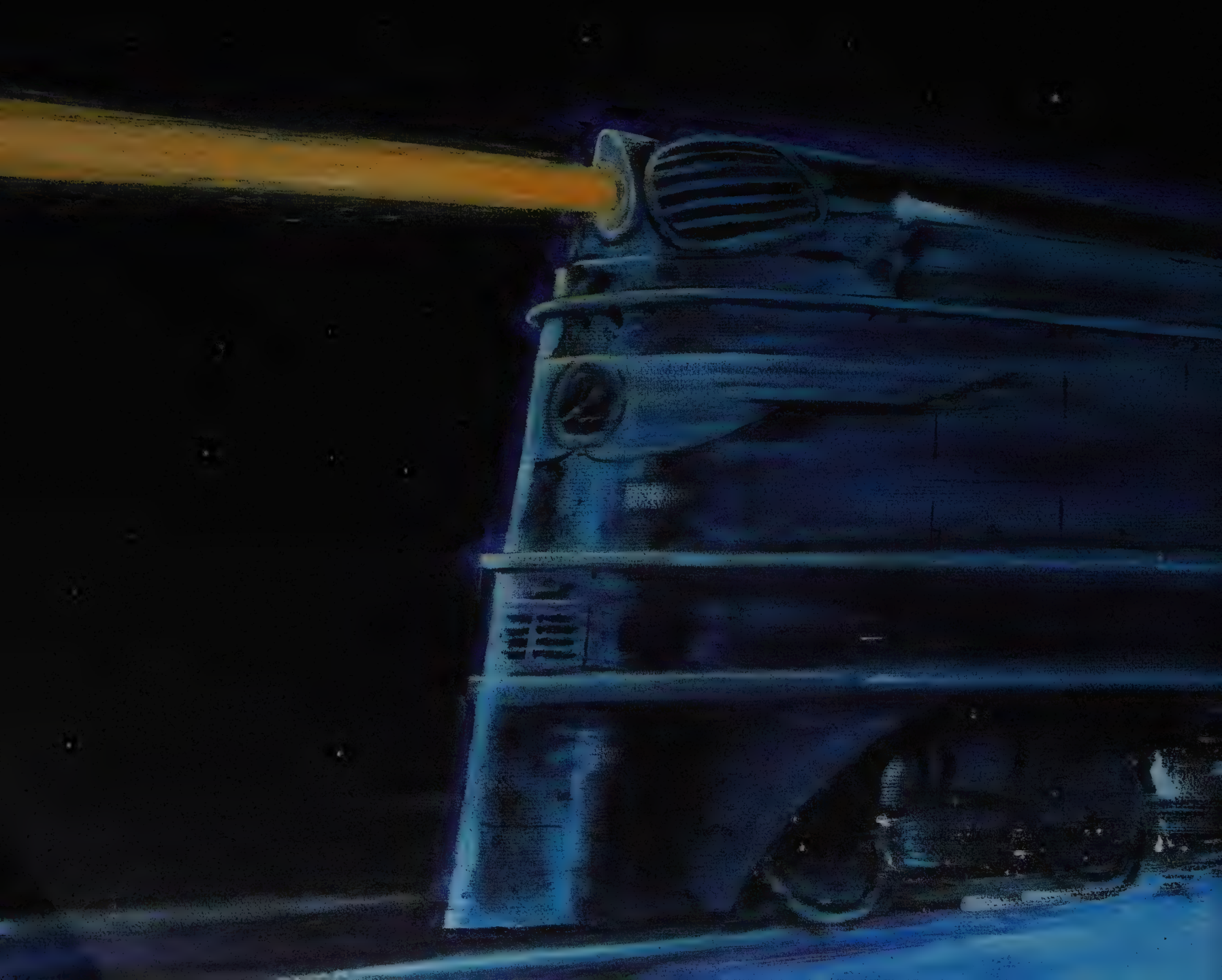
Now he heard it.

A high-pitched whistle cracked across the countryside like the snap of a bullwhip. The rails began to hum. He could almost imagine them turning color: changing from cold lifeless black to brilliant flame orange, throbbing with energy and promise.

Something big was approaching the farmhouse.

A single light shot through the darkness.

He could see a dark shadow behind it, swaying back and forth, spraying snow as it plowed down the valley.



The light thundered by the farmhouse, leading a huge steam engine. The earth trembled. The house shook.

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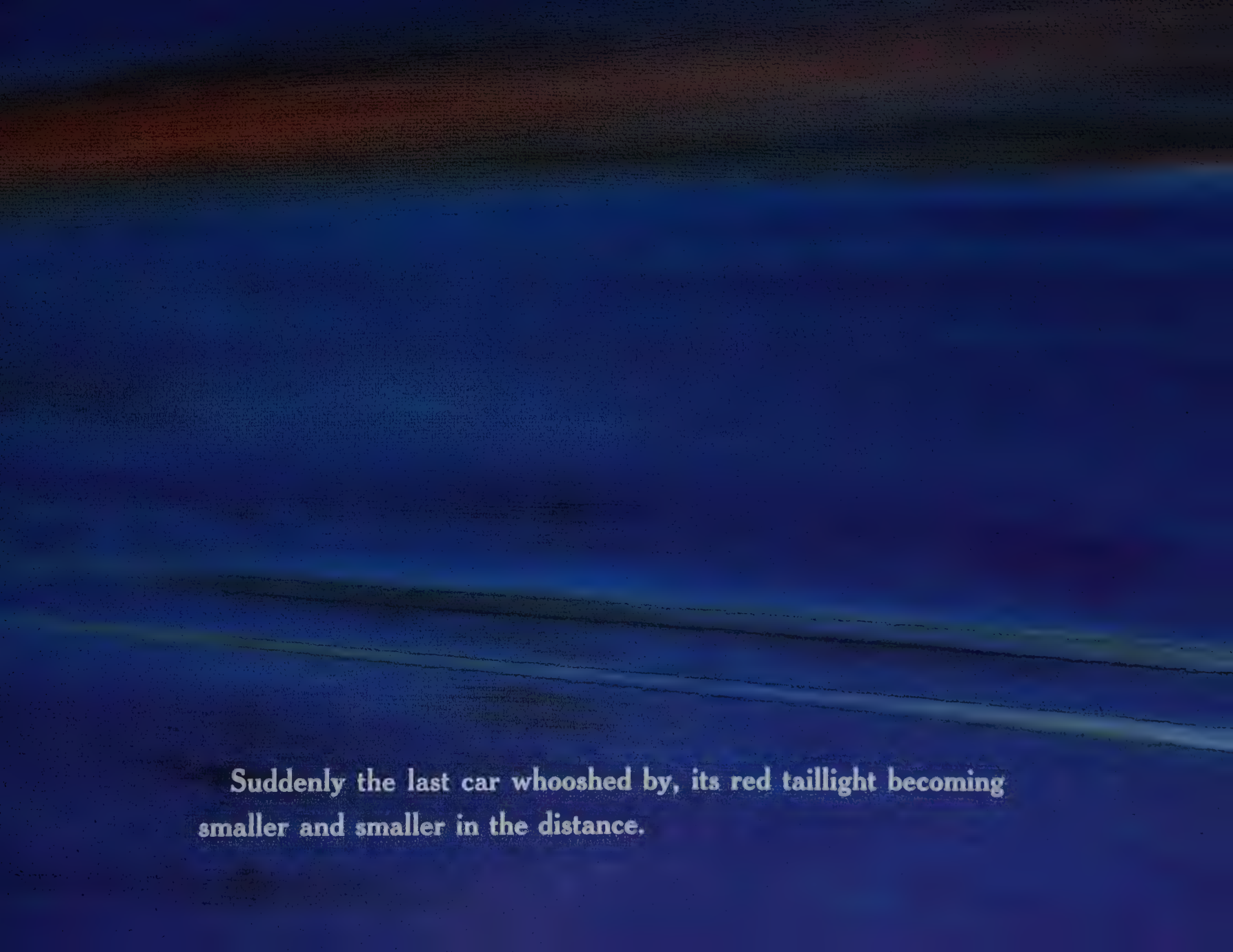
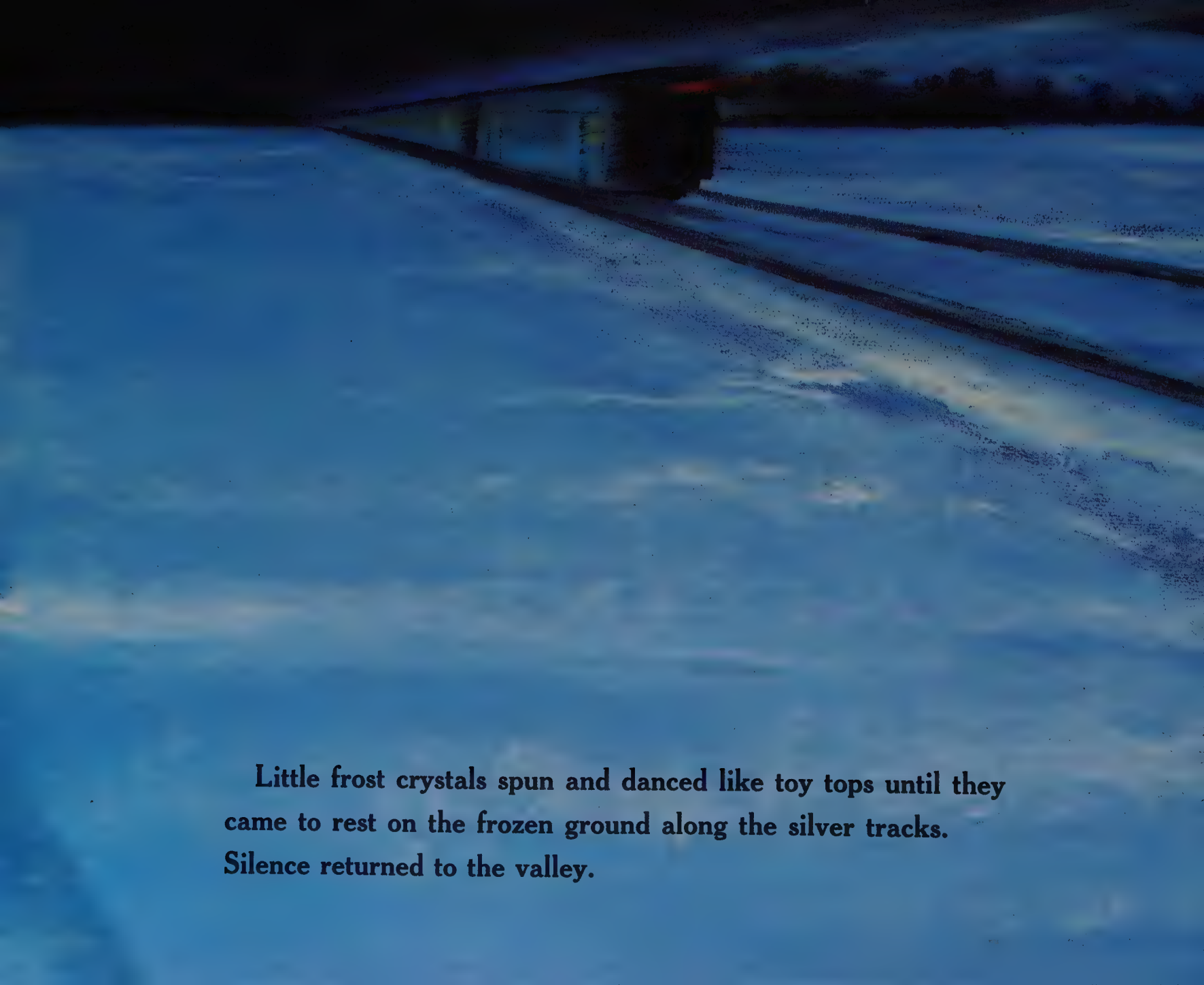
A string of box-shaped lights flew by, roaring and rattling.

Within each box was a blurred face peering out into the night: framed pictures of midnight travelers.

Who are these people? the boy wondered. *Where are they going? Why aren't they asleep under their feather quilts?*



Suddenly the last car whooshed by, its red taillight becoming smaller and smaller in the distance.



Little frost crystals spun and danced like toy tops until they came to rest on the frozen ground along the silver tracks. Silence returned to the valley.

The boy took one last look at the fleeting train, and at that instant a shooting star etched a brilliant trail across the velvet black sky.

Sleep overcame the boy. He was lucky; he was content. For on this night, at Grandma and Grandpa's farm, he had witnessed the passage of two shooting stars, one on earth and one in the heavens.

Hiawatha, 1935–1970

In 1935 the Milwaukee Railroad System introduced a new train on its Chicago-to-Minneapolis run. Faster and more powerful than other trains of its day, it was considered to be in a class by itself. The train was called the *Hiawatha* and was nicknamed the "Fleetfooted Indian." Within two months of its inaugural run, the *Hiawatha* gained international fame when it became the fastest train in the world, surpassing the record held by an engine on Great Britain's London and North Eastern Railway. For the next two years the *Hiawatha* continued to set both speed and ticket-sale records.

During the 1936 season, the *Hiawatha* consistently attained speeds of 100 m.p.h. over sustained distances on its routes through Minnesota, Wisconsin, and northern Illinois. Its fastest recorded speed was 112 m.p.h., between Watertown and New Lisbon, Wisconsin.

Federal speed regulations curtailed the competition between American and English trains in the late 1930s. The *Hiawatha* went on to become one of the legendary trains of all time, carrying millions of people across the heartland—until 1970, when the southbound "highstepping" *Hiawatha* made its final journey through the valleys and ridges of Wisconsin's driftless land and slipped off into history.

I grew up in a hundred-year-old farmhouse in southern Minnesota that overlooked a valley where the night trains passed. Every Christmas, I rode the *Hiawatha* with my family from Minneapolis to Chicago. Forty years later, the excitement and wonder of that childhood experience is a crystal, enduring memory. My story of the *Hiawatha* is dedicated to my son, Kit, and to all those who have ever listened with their heart to the long, melodic call of a locomotive engine passing in the night.

—J.H.

To my son, Jonathan—K.S.

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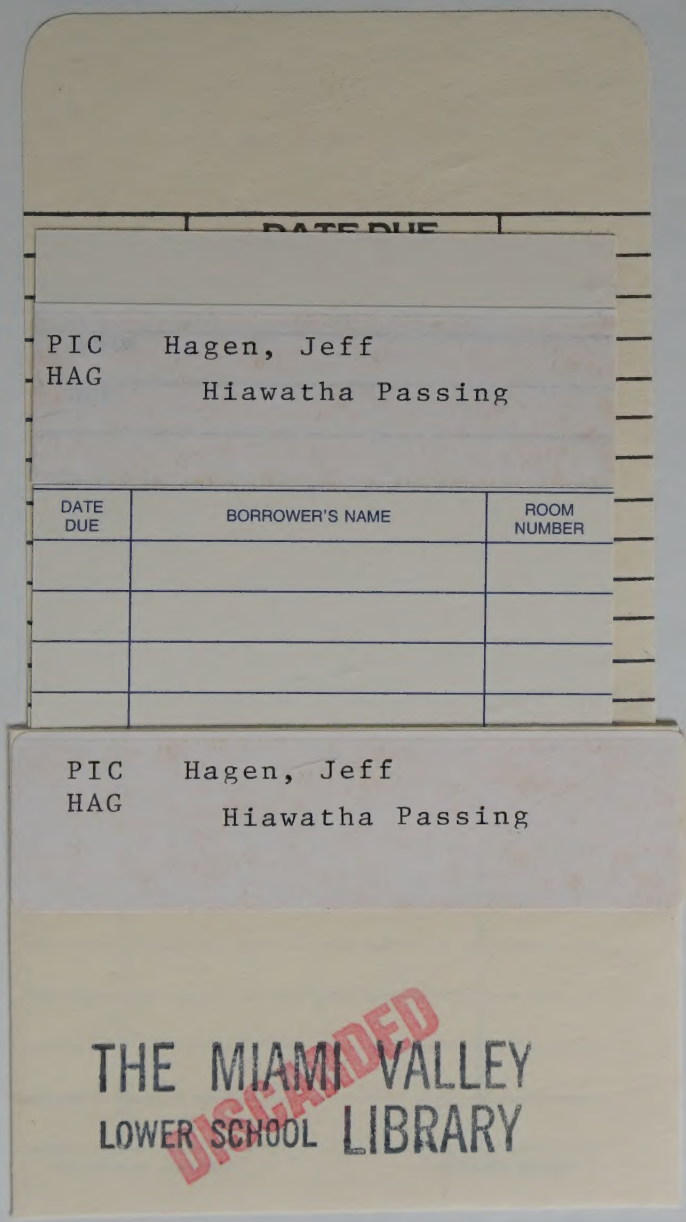
The artist used oil paints on canvas to create the illustrations for this book.



Jeff Hagen

is a storyteller, teacher, writer, and artist. He travels the United States and abroad in search of those extraordinary stories that can be found in ordinary lives. This material is the focus of his cover stories, which have appeared in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune,* the *Chicago Tribune,* the *Milwaukee Journal,* and the *Detroit News.* Mr. Hagen is currently working on four new books. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with his son, Kit.

Kenneth Shue

is an artist and printmaker. His paintings for *Hiawatha Passing* were inspired by the great American painter Edward Hopper. Hopper and his wife make a cameo appearance in these pages as "midnight travelers." Mr. Shue lives with his son, Jonathan, in Palo Alto, California.

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